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ABSTRACT

A research project was conducted to determine the methods of information delivery preferred by targeted clientele of extension offices in North Carolina, and what methods clients might prefer in the future. Eleven North Carolina Cooperative Extension agents representing all areas of the state cooperated in the study. The agents developed educational programs with objectives from the four major subject areas of agriculture, home economics, youth (4-H) organizations, and community development. They randomly selected a sample of 77 clients from their potential audience of 994 people. The 77 clients were interviewed using a questionnaire developed for the project. Interviewees mostly had agricultural interests; they included community leaders, environmentalists, urban home owners, school teachers, day care providers, and production agriculture workers. The study found that, even though great diversity existed in the interests of the targeted audiences, their preferences of delivery methods were remarkably similar. Personal visits, meetings, newsletters, demonstrations, and workshops were preferred methods. Computer instruction, faxes, and videotapes were expected to become more important in the future, although these methods were the most unfamiliar to the clients. Regardless of the delivery methods, clients strongly preferred information that was customized for them. (KC)

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AN ASSESSMENT OF CLIENTELE PREFERENCES FOR RECEIVING EXTENSION INFORMATION

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AN ASSESSMENT OF CLIENTELE PREFERENCES FOR RECEIVING EXTENSION INFORMATION

Delivery of Extension educational programs can take many forms. Altogether, at least seventy-two delivery methods can be used for delivery of information via non-formal educational means. Since Extension's educational programs are generally voluntary, successful programs must focus on analyzed needs of the publics in which Extension strives to serve, and the wide variety of choices for delivery of those programs must be considered as programs are implemented.

As Extension education has evolved, printed materials, meetings, and demonstrations have seen considerable use. During the early years of official Extension, the demonstration became the symbol of successful extension education, as depicted in the painting entitled "The County Agent" by Norman Rockwell that shows the Extension agent demonstrating the characteristics for selection of a 4-H calf (Rasmussen,1989).

Today, while many of the original program delivery methods used by Cooperative Extension are still used successfully, program delivery options and opportunities have changed as communications technologies have changed. Some technologies are now taken for granted as delivery methods, such as the telephone, radio, and television that were unavailable in earlier years of extension education. Today, video and audiocassettes are common place, and fax transmissions and computer networks are rapidly becoming key means for delivery of information. Indeed, satellite transmissions, and other hi-tech communications systems are becoming a normal part of our daily living. However, as with any delivery means, Extension educators should not only consider the availability of the delivery method, but also its utility for achieving educational objectives. Clientele preferences for receiving needed information must also be recognized, especially due to the voluntary nature of nonformal education and the client's freedom to engage in a learning opportunity or to disengage at will.

CLIENTELE PREFERENCES

During the past several years, some applied research has focused on the program delivery preferences of certain clientele as well as the effectiveness of specific methods in providing viable Extension programs. In an Iowa study, Martin and Omer (1988) reported that

young farmers preferred that Extension agents use group oriented methods such as community meetings. The person to person means of office and telephone conferences were considered less important for receiving information. To obtain information about environmental issues, Bruening (1991) reported that Pennsylvania farmers most prefer field demonstrations. County and local meetings as well as magazines and printed material also ranked high.

Among North Carolina farmers, Richardson (1989) reported that the five methods most frequently used for receiving Extension information were (1) newsletters, (2) meetings, (3) farm visits(agent to farmers), (4) telephone, and (5) on-farm tests and demonstrations. In this study, traditional program delivery methods were found to be popular, but the farmer clientele indicated an interest in receiving information in the future via technologies that were considered newer at that time, such as computers and video tapes. There was a indicated decline in anticipated use of bulletins and magazine articles for receiving information in the future.

While North Carolina farmers expected to use some types of printed materials less, other printed media such as newsletters were popular both for present needs and for anticipated future use. Similar opinions were held in Oklahoma, as farmers there rated newsletters and fact sheets highest in preference for receiving Extension information for making decisions on alternative enterprises (Keating, 1990). For information on new and innovative farming practices, Idaho farmers preferred more interpersonal methods. These methods included demonstrations, tours, field trips, and group discussion. Mass media methods were the least preferred means for receiving this type of information (Gor, 1990).

When using printed materials such as newsletters and fact sheets, studies in Florida and Oklahoma confirmed that acceptance and use of these means of delivery can be significantly enhanced by targeting the audience and tailoring the message to that audience (Nehiley and William, 1980), (Reisbeck, 1980). Indeed, Clement (1994) in a North Carolina study, found that a targeted Extension audience of county government personnel indicated high preferences for printed, self-study type materials such as newsletters, newspapers, bulletin/pamphlet and leaflets or flyers.

These studies clearly show that clientele preferences do exist, and may be quite different depending upon the audience being served. Therefore, considering the great variability between groups, and indicated personal preferences, it is likely that no single delivery method is suitable for everyone. Yet, some trends exist that can be of value to the Extension agent in planning and implementing an educational program. For example, newsletters that

are developed and directed toward a targeted audience appear quite popular. Meetings and other opportunities for discussion and interaction also appear to be popular among farm clientele. However, mass media methods were seldom identified as having high value for receiving specific information, except with an audience that could be classified as nontraditional, such as the county government personnel.

Such assessments can be highly valuable for providing educational programs that reach their intended audience(s) in a useful and efficient manner. In order to assess the program delivery preferences of specifically targeted Extension audiences in North Carolina, a study was conducted during the summer of 1992.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of the research project was to determine the preferences of targeted clientele for receiving specific Extension information.

A second objective was to determine if clientele perceived any program delivery methods becoming more important to them in the future.

A third objective was to determine if any program delivery methods were unfamiliar, but may be used by clientele for obtaining information if Extension would provide assistance in helping clientele become more familiar with the method(s).

Another objective was to determine if Extension clientele perceived any program delivery methods as becoming less important in the future.

In a later companion study, one additional objective was included. That objective was to determine if any methods were seen as out of date or obsolete by clientele. Those findings from that study are included in one section of this paper.

METHODOLOGY

Eleven North Carolina Cooperative Extension agents originating from eleven different counties in North Carolina representing areas from the mountains to the coast cooperated in this study. Each agent selected a subject matter area applicable to their county, and developed relevant program objectives to meet the needs of their local publics. The content of the subjects ranged from an urban waste management program to preconditioning beef cattle. The

programs included subjects from the four major subject areas of agriculture, home economics, 4-H, and community development. As each educational objective was developed by each agent, they identified a specific audience in their county which was targeted for the educational program. Those audiences targeted were listed numerically. Seven persons were randomly selected from each agent's list and a personal interview of those selected was conducted by the agent. Each agent made their random selections by choosing numbers from a random number table. Altogether, seventy-seven clientele were interviewed, who represented a total of 994 people in the targeted audiences.

A questionnaire was developed and pretested, which was used by the agents during the personal interviews of clientele. In order to provide clientele a reference source, a listing of sixty-five methods were included. Responses were analyzed from each county and from all the counties combined. The sample was representative of the state geographically as all regions of the state were included.

A majority of the clientele had agricultural interests, but targeted audiences included community leaders; persons interested in watershed protection; urban home owners; school teachers involved in youth in-school enrichment programs; day care providers; as well as persons with interest in production agriculture programs.

FINDINGS

Perhaps one of the most interesting findings was that even though great diversity existed in the interests of the targeted audiences and the program focus for those audiences, their preferences of delivery methods were remarkably similar.

Preferred Methods

The information contained in Table 1 indicates preferences for mostly traditional delivery methods. The videocassette is the only "newer method" in which any meaningful acceptance appears to have occurred among these clientele groups.

TABLE 1: The Twenty-Two Most Preferred Delivery Methods Chosen by Extension Clientele as Among Their Five Most Preferred for Receiving Specific Information.

Method	Times Selected	% Clientele Selecting
Personal visit	36	46.8
Meeting	32	41.6
Newsletter	30	39.0
Method demonstration	26	33.8
Workshop	20	26.0
Videocassette	18	23.4
Bulletin/pamphlet	16	20.8
Field day	16	20.8
On-farm test	16	20.8
Seminar	12	15.6
Fact sheet	11	14.3
Lecture	10	13.0
Tour	9	11.7
Telephone	8	10.4
Leaflet/flyer	7	9.1
Group discussion	7	9.1
Letter	7	9.1
Office visit	7	9.1
Data analysis/results	6	7.8
Slide-tape	6	7.8
Newspaper	6	7.8
Specialty publication	6	7.8

Methods Expected to Become More Important

When asked to identify any methods that clientele expect to be important for receiving information in the future, many of the "newer methods" were identified. The information contained in Table 2 reflects these findings.

TABLE 2: Top Ten Methods Extension Clientele Expect to Become More Important For Receiving Information.

Method	N	% Clientele Selecting
Computer software	26	33.8
Computer network	22	28.6
Fax	19	24.7
Video cassette	12	15.6
Newsletter	10	13.0
Workshop	9	11.7
Satellite conferencing	8	10.4
On-farm test	8	10.4
Personal visit	7	9.1
Meeting	7	9.1

Unfamiliar Methods

When asked to identify delivery methods that are unfamiliar, but may be useful, the clientele selected many "newer methods". The information contained in Table 3 indicates some positive acceptance of methods that could be described as non-traditional.

TABLE 3: Top Ten Methods Identified as Unfamiliar but Willing to Use.

Method	N	% Clientele Selecting
Computer software	21	27.3
Computer network	13	16.9
Fax	8	10.4
Satellite conferencing	6	7.8
Teleconferencing	6	7.8
Home study kit	5	6.5
Teletip	5	6.5
Video cassette	5	6.5
Interactive video	4	5.2
Networking	4	5.2

Methods of Little Interest or Value

Identification of the methods that some clientele consider of little interest to them found a unique mix of higher technology methods along with others that many adults may consider more appropriate for children. The information contained in Table 4 reflects the interesting mix of methods.

TABLE 4: Top Ten Methods Clientele Consider of Little Interest or Value for Receiving Extension Information.

Method	N	% Clientele Selecting
Puppet	35	45.5
Satellite conferencing	32	41.6
Fax	26	33.8
Skit	25	32.5
Computer software	23	29.9
Computer network	18	23.4
Game	16	20.8
Role play	15	19.5
Church bulletin	14	18.2
Teleconferencing	13	16.9

Methods Clientele Never Expect To Use

When asked if there were any methods that they never expected to use, a similar mix of those in Table 4 was indicated. Apparently, similar attitudes existed among some clientele as to acceptance of newer technologies or their availabilities, or ideas relating to childish methods prevailed. The information contained in Table 5 reflects these findings.

TABLE 5: Top Ten Methods Identified as Ones They Never Expect to Use For Receiving Extension Information.

Method	N	% Clientele Selecting
Puppet	26	33.8
Fax	18	23.4
Satellite conferencing	17	22.1
Skit	15	19.5
Computer software	14	18.2
Church bulletin	13	16.9
Game	10	13.0
Cable television	10	13.0
Teleconferencing	9	11.7
Computer network	7	9.1

LATER STUDY

In a later study using the same methodology, conducted in the Fall of 1993, in addition to identifying the information presented in Tables 1 through 5, Extension clientele were also asked to identify methods they consider obsolete or out-of date. This study also reflected the thoughts of a varied clientele, and was obtained through interviews with 112 clientele, mostly in western North Carolina. These findings are shown in Table 6.

TABLE 6: Top Ten Methods Extension Clientele Consider Out-of-Date and Likely to Become Obsolete.

Method	N	% Clientele Selecting
Film strip	20	17.9
Slide-tape	16	14.3
Movie/film	8	7.1
Bulletin board	5	4.4
Puppet	5	4.4
Role play	5	4.4
Skit	5	4.4
Comics	4	3.6
Personal visit	4	3.6
Photograph	4	3.6

SUMMARY

Clientele preferences for receiving specifically targeted information is generally compatible with previous research findings, as personal visits, meetings, newsletters, demonstrations, and workshops ranked highest (Table 1). While these methods may be considered traditional, a clearly emerging newer technology is the video cassette, which was listed by nearly one-fourth of clientele as one of their five most preferred methods for receiving targeted information. When clientele were asked their reasons for selecting a method, those reasons focused almost exclusively on being able to use these methods for their subject and audience specificity. Considerable value was also placed on methods that allowed them opportunities to see and do, as well as to discuss the information.

For methods that clientele expect to become more important in the future, nearly all are newer and emerging technologies. However, even here, newsletters, workshops, and on-farm tests and demonstrations clearly are seen as relevant both presently and in the future by clientele (Table 2). Reasons given for selecting these methods related mostly to speed, ease, and efficiency.

In identifying methods that are unfamiliar, but willing for Extension to help them use, a great majority chosen were newer, high technology methods (Table 3).

When clientele were asked to name those methods of little interest or value, analysis of the date and their verbal reasons indicated either a general lack of availability or need for the newer methods, while other methods were seen uniquely applicable to certain audiences, but not for those interviewed (Table 4). Very similar expressions were given for identifying those methods that clientele never expect to use (Table 5).

The identification of numerous methods as obsolete reflects their knowledge and understanding of the viability of methods that can indeed be used for obtaining information. The top three methods identified in Table 6 were described as old technology, and that newer technologies such as videocassettes could be used more effectively than these older methods.

DISCUSSION

Many of the findings of this research are compatible with previous reports. Perhaps the diversity of the audiences and subjects gives validity to certain methods as especially useful for a broad range of audiences. Potentially most noteworthy is the strong interest that about one-third of the clientele have for high technology delivery methods such as computer technologies. Yet, nearly one-half of the audiences continue to prefer personalized interactive, hands-on methods. Thus, while continuing to use the more traditional, personalized methods, the interest in newer technologies indicates the need for Extension professionals to stay abreast of newer technologies and integrate these newer delivery methods into programming activities as appropriate.

However one must be cognizant that some clientele see the newer technologies as fast, efficient, and easy for obtaining information, while others see these new tools as unnecessary, unavailable, complex, or useless. Under these latter situations, where appropriate, Extension will need to educate their clients as to the benefits of delivery methods such as Fax. Under these circumstances, educational opportunities will need to be provided clientele on both the subject matter and the means of delivering the information.

Altogether, these findings demonstrate the need for continued efforts by Extension to provide educational opportunities through multiple delivery methods. However, those methods described as obsolete or childish can rapidly influence the motivation of the learner to continue in the educational program. Therefore, those methods which clientele do not like or have no use for could be disastrous to the success of an educational program if over used.

Perhaps the strongest message that clientele gave for preferring certain delivery methods was that the methods chosen provided them information that was both subject and audience specific, and provided them an opportunity to receive the information in an understandable and personally comfortable manner. Also, while some methods may be preferred, the relevance of the subject, and availability to them was shown to be an undergirding factor, regardless of the delivery method. Perhaps this factor is best demonstrated by the 49 different methods that were chosen as one of five preferred methods for receiving the needed information.

Successful implementation of Extension education programs in the future will require knowledge of the targeted audience, its characteristics, level of knowledge, and skillful selection and use of appropriate delivery methods for the targeted audience, as well as the subject matter to be presented.

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